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City Manager: Police Shouldn't Use All Property Taxes

The department's expenditures were among many components in what Rick Eckert called a "crisis budget."

By [Michael Stone](#) | [Email the author](#) | June 21, 2011

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Powder Springs City Manager Rick Eckert said he'd like to see whoever takes over as police chief decrease the funding used by the [police department](#) to a maximum of 75 percent of property taxes.

"It should be noted that the police department does use up 100 percent of property taxes and a percentage of the franchise fees that are paid into the general fund. This can't continue into the future unless we see some serious economic increase in the community," he said at Monday's City Council meeting for the first reading of next fiscal year's budget, which begins July 1.

Powder Springs is facing a general budget shortfall of \$346,000, down from [the \\$375,000](#) originally thought. The proposed budget—which still requires a second reading at the June 29 special called meeting—is attached to this article.

The police department, made up of 30 officers and four civilian employees, is facing \$275,000 in cuts alone, taking its budget down to \$2.74 million.

The city, though, is not planning to raise property taxes, layoff employees, or schedule any employee furloughs.

To help balance the current budget, five full-time and nine part-time employees were let go in 2010.

"Last year, we balanced a budget with staff cuts and decreases in spending," Eckert said. "And to continue to do so will result in loss of essential services to the city of Powder Springs. We might be able to combine some personnel and increase duties, but this will be the last year we can do this."

During his roughly 20-minute presentation to the council, Eckert outlined why the city is hurting and gave several suggestions for ways to fight through.

The nation's city manager said that Powder Springs and are showing no signs of stopping, the city

"Without a major revenue source, the city's revenues will continue to decline due to the worsening economic

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conditions,” h [_____](#) g by \$319,000—from \$5.089 million to \$4.770 million

He said that declining sales taxes, which for draw an extra penny on the dollar through the Special Purpose Local Options Sales Tax, will hurt “critical” projects funded by SPLOST.

Meanwhile, he added, the city is waiting on \$1.25 million from the Georgia Department of Transportation that was used to acquire property to make room for the Lewis Road extension, which connects C. H. James Parkway and Marietta Street.

Eckert said the city hasn’t received reimbursement, “nor can we count on those funds being reimbursed in the near future due to the financial condition of the state government.”

The upcoming [storm water fee](#)—which does not yet have a set amount but will likely be between \$2 and \$4 monthly—will help with storm water issues facing Powder Springs, Eckert said. But, he said, that money won’t help with flood plain problems.

Without money to do studies on storm water and flood plains, grants are hard to acquire, Eckert said.

He thanked city employees, who haven't had a raise in nearly four years.

“Public staff ... are not very well paid. A lot of people think the opposite of that is true. On a federal level, that may be different, but certainly not on the local level,” he said. “So again, I can’t thank our staff enough for the hours they put in (and) the hard work they do.”

But Eckert cautioned that in spite of efficiency, financial books must be done properly.

“While efficient use of manpower and equipment across the proper lines is admirable, care must be taken to adhere to the GASB (Governmental Accounting Standards Board) accounting requirements and proper accounting principles while doing so,” he said.

Some possible cost-savers Eckert mentioned included outsourcing the city’s water, sewer and sanitation.

Sanitation, he said, has been operating without a “major increase” for a significant period of time, and current rates don’t allow revenues to meet expenses. With fuel costs, liability and health insurance associated with services, outsourcing needs to be done or there could be a reduction in city employees this year, he added.

“Part of our problem (why) we have a shortfall is that the Powder Springs sanitation department—as well as the rest of the city—was expecting a major increase in population in the residential subdivisions,” Eckert said.

So the neighborhoods were approved and planned out, and in many instances, roads and utilities were put in place and equipment was purchased, he said. “And the reduction in staff that should have occurred never happened.”

Personnel hiring has been halted, Eckert said. “And all vacancies will remain unfilled for this budget year unless grant funds are obtained for that specific purpose.”

One such grant the city has applied for would fill three vacant positions at the police department, paying their salaries for three years with the city being obligated to pay for the fourth year. Douglas County [has applied for the grant](#) as well for eight frozen deputy positions.

Eckert suggested that only the newer vehicles of the 18 at the police department be used and rotated between officers because the older ones require “more extensive maintenance.” Interim Police Chief Tom Arnold has recommended entering into an agreement with Cobb for more efficient vehicle maintenance, he added.

New police vehicles, Eckert said, can only be purchased through grants.

He said only one capital improvement plan is scheduled for the coming fiscal year: replacing a collapsed sewer line.

“The fiscal 2012 budget is basically a crisis budget, and city managers associations everywhere are talking just ‘crisis budgets’ because that’s what it is, given the national economy,” the city manager said.

Though the budget is balanced, Eckert said, “it does not fix the crisis we are in; it’s merely putting a band-aid on. ... All departments have managed to cut, to trim, to really bite the bullet, and to also consider consolidation and working together as departments to get different projects done.”

He added: “I’m very proud of what they do.”

With no major highways or interstates running through Powder Springs and no railroad stops, Eckert said the city is looking into what can be done to be more attractive to businesses.

Next year’s budget took city employees “literally hundreds of hours” to prepare, Eckert said, describing it as the hardest one of his career.

“People are looking at remaking their organizations, remaking the way they do business because cities cannot continue to operate the way they have in the past—it’s just not feasible anymore. It probably never will be,” he said. “So we’re going to all be looking at redefining city government, city operations, how to work, how to work smarter, and how to be more efficient.”

Also on Monday:

- The council approved three land purchases totaling roughly \$1 million through 2005 SPLOST dollars. The land is near downtown and will be used for parking lots and roads leading to them.
- The council approved \$31,000 for a virtualization server. “What it does is it allows us to use less hardware with more” purposes, Robert Cillo, the city’s IT manager, said at Wednesday’s work session.
- The council approved \$4,000 for next fiscal year to go toward the Metropolitan North Georgia Water Planning District’s [toilet rebate program](#).
- Vaughn wished Estie Norris, the oldest member of the [Powder Springs Senior Center](#), a happy birthday. Norris was [thrown a surprise party](#) for her 96th birthday on Saturday.
- Councilwoman Cheryl Sarvis mentioned the success of three recent events: Bethel Gardens Assisted Living [fundraiser for wounded veterans](#), a

health fair meeting for city employees, and [the meet-and-greet](#) with the three candidates in the running for the open police chief position.

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Pam J

9:38 am on Tuesday, June 21, 2011

I wonder how much they paid for the building and renovation for the new police station on Richard D. Sailors?

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Grace

10:54 am on Friday, June 24, 2011

I find a paradox between these two comments in the article:

"The city, though, will not institute a property tax increase, layoff employees, or schedule any furloughs for the next budget."

"Some possible cost-savers Eckert mentioned included outsourcing the city's water, sewer and sanitation."

They say they are not going to layoff employees, yet they are going to outsource city's water, sewer and sanitation. What is going to happen to the 40 some employees who actually do the work? When will they be notified of this decision? Is this going to happen right after the November election, after positions have been secured, and then let people go during the Christmas season? Will the City Residents receive the same quality work that we are so accustomed to received from City employees? Not only quality, but also fast response, and friendly approach. Just asking.

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